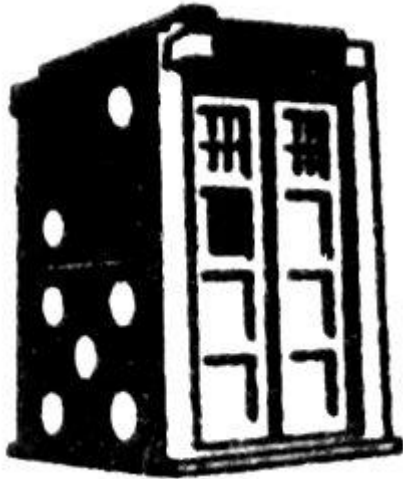


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Continuity Errors



By Steven Moffat

**The Luna University, The Hammerstein Building, smaller lecture theatre.
2643.**

The little man on the podium plucked his watch from his waistcoat and glanced quickly round the lecture hall. Around fourteen million, he estimated. Almost half full. Ten minutes more would probably see the rest of the virtual attendees downloaded from the... thingummy. Never any good at technobabble, he reflected. All those consonants.

As his hand reached for the scroll button (on his Notematic Whatchamacallit) he noticed he was shaking, if only very slightly. Nerves, of course. Understandable. He wasn't just giving a speech, after all: today he was going to change history. And a great deal was hanging on his getting things exactly right.

The lovingly prepared speech (eight weeks of actual writing, thirty years of research, a lifetime of serious resentment) spun silently across the Vidtronic Whatsit.

Ten minutes. Just time for one quick readthrough...

Extract from Professor Candy's lecture notes.

Doctor Who?

(Notes for Franklin lecture)

Doctor who? Nice guy or utter bastard? (*Look round the audience sternly. Ignore gigglers.*)
With the wealth of historical evidence now unearthed, few people still doubt that the time- travelling Doctor is more than simply a myth or, as has been claimed, a conspiracy of historians on drugs very late at night. He's real and he's out there. The question is – do we want him?

The sole surviving Morthoid from the Dark Planet once remarked, ‘Never argue politics with the Doctor. He’ll just nip down a ventilation shaft, destabilize your political infrastructure, and blow up your solar system.’ (*If get laugh, smile knowingly. If don’t, look serious.*)

The Daleks of Skaro, of course, know him as the Ka Faraq Gatri. Traditionally this is translated as ‘Bringer Of Darkness’ though Professor Lyttle has established beyond reasonable doubt that this translation was, typically, the work of the Doctor himself. More accurately, and with that wonderful Dalek sense of irony, Ka Faraq Gatri means ‘Nice guy – if you’re a biped.’ And that perhaps sums up the Doctor better than anything. He just never knows when the Daleks are kidding.

Do we want him then? Do we need this one- man crusade crashing round our history, patronizing our ancestors and kidnapping young women? Oh, yes, kidnapping them indeed! And simply discarding them wherever and whenever he chooses, the moment they grow too old or cease to be amusing. Consider, for a moment, the plight of the grieving parent whose daughter is not dead, nor in any conventional sense missing, but is a Warrior Queen on Thoros Beta. Can you imagine explaining that while the police are digging up your garden?

Incidentally, on the subject of the young women who have, seemingly voluntarily, become the disciples of the Doctor, the sponsors of today’s lecture have released a special, full colour pictorial tribute to these many unfortunates, which is available in the foyer for any students who wish to continue their studies on their own. I’ve been asked to tell you that it includes never seen before holographs of Jo Grant, Tegan Jovanka, and...

The New Alexandria Library, 2668.

‘Excuse me, does your Archaeology section have a minibar?’

For a moment the Librarian didn’t even want to look up. She wanted to keep looking at her screen, concentrate very hard, and hope that this very stupid person who was asking this very stupid question at the end of this very long and stupid day would take a hint and combust. She gave it one whole second – no sudden blast of heat, no falling ashes. The trouble with people these days, thought the Librarian bitterly, was that they simply had no manners. She left it two more seconds (precisely calculated – any longer you look deaf, any shorter you look interested) and looked up. Good face, bad earrings; could those clothes be on purpose?

Bad Earrings smiled (rookie mistake) and repeated the question (had this woman ever *met* a librarian before?).

‘Yes, of *course* it has a minibar. This is a *library*, you know!’

Bad Earrings slapped the counter triumphantly and turned to a little man with a worse sweater. ‘You see. Academically, I’ve had an effect!’

Worse Sweater was frowning. He tapped his chin thoughtfully with the handle of a simply appalling umbrella – dear God, the umbrella and the sweater *matched* – and said, ‘All right, you can go. But any books you wrote, you’re not allowed to read!’

‘Can I run copies? It’ll save me time when I get around to writing them.’

‘Absolutely not. They come down very heavily on that sort of thing.’

‘Time Lords?’

‘Critics.’

She nodded soberly. ‘Better behave, then.’

As she turned to go, Worse Sweater pointed his umbrella at her. It looked like a warning. ‘Particularly not your diary!’

‘My diary gets published?’

‘You may already be here sticking Post- Its over it.’

Bad Earrings sighed. ‘So I keep doing that, do I?’

‘Sometimes there’s a queue of you.’

With a grimace, Bad Earrings turned and headed through the cavern of the Reception Hall to the TransBooths. The Librarian decided to dislike her intensely, which was the twenty- eighth time that day she’d made roughly that decision. She noticed, with a complete lack of curiosity, that just as Bad Earrings reached the Archaeology TransBooth she glanced furtively back at her companion as if to check he wasn’t looking. She then quickly changed direction and slipped into the TransBooth two along. Literature department, noted the Librarian, still without the slightest flicker of interest.

Oblivious of this, Worse Sweater – whom the Librarian decided to dislike intensely (twenty- nine)– remained where he was, now leaning on his umbrella and frowning ferociously at the floor, as if he thought he could burn through it just by staring. The thought slipped into her head that if he really wanted to he probably could and she felt herself blinking in surprise. She hadn’t meant to think that! Where had that thought come from? Abruptly she found herself thinking that there was no point in worrying about the odd random thought pottering around in her head unexpectedly and she should get on with thinking about something else immediately. So she did.

She forced her attention back to the catalogue screen and assured herself it would take a great deal more than some transplanted garden gnome in a stupid hat to hold her interest.

Suddenly the little man stopped ignoring her (Damn! Why was she staring at him again?) and looked up. The frown was gone, flicked off as if he’d just thrown a switch, and in its place the gap- toothed smile – no, *grin* – of a seven- year- old delightedly showing his mother some worms he’d found in the garden.

‘I’m looking for a book,’ he said.

She held eye contact and risked the full four- second pause, raising an ironic eyebrow halfway through the third second so there could be no confusion about her faculties. ‘Well in view of the fact that this is a library,’ she replied with precision- judged tartness, ‘indeed not only a library, but the single largest, most comprehensive library anywhere and at any time;

given that our catalogue department itself crosses two international datelines and a HyperSound Monorail pass is essential simply to get around the detective fiction section alone; considering that any book of any type ever written in all of history, in all the known Universe, is stored on these premises; with all that in mind, may I venture to suggest that you have come to the right place?’

The idiot- child grin grew broader – not just some worms, probably a dead mouse in a milk bottle too. ‘In that case you’ll have David Hittenstall’s *Massacre On Deltherus 5: The definitive account of the Drakoids’ extermination of the last of the Deltherons?*’

‘You’ll forgive me, I hope, if I haven’t memorized the entire stock, consisting, as it does, of every word ever written by a sentient being. I had yesterday off.’

‘David was sentient most of the time. Which means you must have his book.’

‘Block 4300B, floor 2348, cabinet 45, second top shelf. It’s right on the pole so take a coat.’ Gratifyingly he looked surprised. ‘I said I hadn’t memorized the *entire* stock... Try me tomorrow.’

He smiled again, doffed his hat (did he do that without taking his hands from the handle of his umbrella? No, that would be silly!) and spun smartly on his heel. She let him raise one foot in the direction of the TransBooths. ‘Of course it’s a restricted text. So there’s no possibility of you being allowed to read it, see it, or even stand around in its general vicinity.’

The foot stayed raised. Then, with comical deftness, he whacked it with his umbrella and spun himself back round to face her. It was like watching some kind of music hall routine, she reflected – except she didn’t know what a music hall routine *was*. Just where were these thoughts coming from? ‘I wonder,’ he said, ‘if we can come to some sort of understanding concerning the word “restricted”.’

‘We have an excellent dictionary department. I believe it’s very pleasant there this time of year.’

‘I was thinking more in terms of perhaps some arrangement we could come to. Just between the two of us.’ The grin again and a wiggle of the eyebrows. Absurdly, his hat seemed to wiggle in sympathy. In other circumstances she might have thought she was being propositioned but the quirky, fidgety little cartoon character in front of her seemed more likely to suggest they bunk off school together and raid an orchard.

‘Restricted,’ she intoned, with relish, ‘means restricted.’

‘Ah! I see you’ve also memorized the dictionaries.’

‘I was bored one day – I worked through lunch.’

‘It really is of vital importance that I see a copy of this book. I happen to know you have the only copy in existence.’

‘Correct.’

‘And that your security systems are such that even *I* could not penetrate them.’

She arched an eyebrow to the perfectly judged angle for maximum irony. ‘Not even you.’

‘Unless, of course, I had your specific permission and the necessary security codes.’

‘Which is absolutely out of the question.’

As he leant forward his face slipped into shadow (what shadow? where was the shadow coming from?) and for a moment his eyes seemed to burn. ‘Lives,’ he said, almost growled, ‘are at stake.’

‘The Deltherons were entirely wiped out by the Drakoids a hundred years ago. I think it may be a little too late to do anything about it now.’

‘The information in that book —’

‘Is restricted.’

‘Is vital to me.’

‘I don’t see why.’

He smiled again, but it was a sad kind of smile this time. ‘Let’s just say I’m a doctor of history.’

She smirked, in a way exactly calculated to inform people when they were being pretentious. ‘You mean you study it.’

‘I mean I make it better.’ And he held her look. Funny thing about those eyes...

For a giddy, plunging moment she *believed* him. She knew he really needed the book, knew that she could trust him absolutely, knew that lives hung in the balance and only this improbable- looking music- hall reject could make a difference. She found herself reaching to punch in the authorization codes and the complex protocols that would pluck the book from its shelf half a world away, suck it through a HyperTube, and thump it down on the desk in front of her. As her fingers flickered over the sensor pad, she only hoped it wasn’t too late, prayed she hadn’t cost this strange little man too much time...

Her hand froze before she even knew why. Music hall? Music hall *again*? What the hell *was* a music hall and why should she be thinking about...

Oh God! She snatched her hand from the sensor pad. Oh dear God! Frantically, she cancelled the Text Release, reversed the protocols. She felt herself trembling with the sudden shock of understanding, with the fear of what she now knew was standing across the counter from her. She made herself look back at the little man with the terrible sweater and the appalling umbrella.

She’d never met him before, of course, and he didn’t look at all as she’d imagined. But it was him. And, God help her, she almost hadn’t noticed!

‘Something wrong?’ he was asking.

She forced down the surge of panic. OK, so it *was* him. What the hell! she thought. She always knew he might turn up here – it had always been a possibility. She could handle this if she just got a grip. Just look him right in the eye, she told herself, and think, ‘So what?’ Better yet, imagine he’s your husband – your husband on the very night he left!

She looked at him again, right in those burning eyes, and she didn’t flinch at all. ‘I want you to understand,’ she said, and her voice didn’t shake in the least, ‘that whatever you do, whatever you try, whatever little plan you have in mind, there is not the slightest chance of you ever being allowed anywhere near that book. Is that entirely clear?’

He stared back at her, gloriously surprised. Hurt even.

She enjoyed the moment to its full, then added in a low voice, ‘I know who you are.’

‘You do?’ asked the CSTE.

Extract from Professor Candy’s lecture notes.

You think this guy can talk his way from a detention cell to the captain’s chair on any given starship in under twenty- five minutes because he’s cute? You’ve seen the pictures. He’s not big on cute! According to every report we’ve got, he comes across as erratic, arrogant, rude, reckless and quite possibly insane. So you’ve got to start wondering why any military outfit he comes in contact with hands him the keys to the gun cupboard, not to mention supreme command, before they’ve even cleared him of the murder they’ve usually just arrested him for.

Why? Understand this. The Doctor is not a person in any sense we understand. He is what I like to call a CSTE – a Complex Space- Time Event. In fact, I believe he is the most complex space- time event there has ever been anywhere. And like all such events he cannot easily be studied because his very presence alters the way you think.

Consider: this man has telepathic abilities that can automatically translate every language in the Universe – not only for himself but for all those in his immediate company. Each of his so- called companions seems to have wandered the Universe in the happy belief that the entire Cosmos speaks their language and, somehow, not considered this even mildly surprising. The conclusion is inescapable. He not only translates for those around him but he uses the same remote telepathic control to suppress any curiosity on the point.

Consider also: if he routinely alters our perceptions to this degree, how else are we misled? How comforting that he appears humanoid. But is he truly? How reassuring that he even seems to wear our clothes. But is that even probable? Most troubling of all, everyone on record as having known the Doctor insists that he is a good man, a hero in fact. But did they think that for themselves?

Or did he think it for them?

The New Alexandra Library, 2668

The Librarian stood stock- still at the counter and felt her breathing slowly return to normal. She had managed to say no and he had stormed off, seemingly to sulk about it. So far, so good.

‘You OK?’ Walter was hovering at her shoulder – naturally – and she wondered for the thousandth time why she tolerated an assistant who was not only impossibly wet but had the most supremely irritating crush on her.

‘I’m fine. Difficult customer, that’s all.’ She nodded in the direction of the CSTE just visible at the far end of the Reception Hall, pacing up and down with almost comic rapidity and muttering fiercely to himself. Not so much difficult as extremely dangerous, she reflected. Still, no reason to alarm Walter.

‘Oh, you mean the Doctor!’

For the very first time she could recall, she looked at Walter in surprise. ‘You know him?’

‘Sort of. All your predecessors were old friends of his.’

She frowned. ‘*All* of them?’

‘Every last one. Funny that, when you think about it.’

More than funny. In fact, deeply troubling. Out loud she said, ‘Might explain why he marches in here expecting special terms. He was after the Hittenstall.’

‘*Massacre On Deltherus 5: The definitive account of the Drakoids’ extermination of the last of the Deltherons?* Block 4300B, floor 2348, cabinet 45, second top shelf?’

‘The very one.’

‘Bit boring in the middle.’

She hesitated, tried to sound casual. ‘My predecessors... did they give him special terms?’

Walter looked evasive. Or rather, since he invariably looked evasive, he looked marginally more evasive than normal. ‘Well as I say – they were friends of his.’

‘You mean they allowed him access to restricted texts?’ she persisted.

Walter performed a spectacularly evasive shrug that seemed to involve at least three shoulders and changed the subject. ‘Why is the Hittenstall restricted anyway?’

‘Because the Drakoids are our friends now. Which makes any minor social infractions they were responsible for in the past a tad embarrassing.’

‘They wiped out an entire species!’

‘And people will keep casting it up.’

‘It was genocide!’

‘You see?’

‘Andrea, I cannot believe that even you...’

Andrea! She almost flinched at the name. Typically, Walter was the only one who ever used it; to herself, and to everyone else, she was always simply the Librarian. She interrupted before he could get through any more indignant spluttering. ‘A judicious amount of fact suppression was part of the treaty.’

‘It’s disgusting, dishonest, and completely amoral!’

‘Sure. But they let us use their beaches.’

‘And what about the Deltherons?’

‘No planet, no beaches.’

Thin-lipped with disapproval, Walter turned to go. ‘Incidentally,’ she added to his back, ‘I was thinking of staying late after work and having dangerous sex with you.’

Walter’s neck did extraordinary things as his head jerked round to look at her. ‘You were?’ he croaked, in naked wonder.

She smiled benignly. ‘No.’

Walter, she considered, did quite the best facial crumple she’d ever witnessed. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Right. Joke. Good. Got that. Fine.’ He turned to go again but almost immediately he swung back round on her, flushed and blinking rapidly with that special kind of hyperventilating rage of the far too sensitive. ‘You know,’ he said – and she could tell he could hardly believe he was saying it – ‘sometimes I just wonder how you managed to turn out this way!’

She shrugged. ‘My daughter was murdered, my husband left me. Just lucky, I guess.’

For a moment he seemed to agonize between continued rage and his more traditional raptures of apology, before he settled for storming off into the back office and slamming the door.

Almost adorable, she thought, in a thoroughly tiresome sort of way. She wondered vaguely what he could possibly see in her and for a moment she almost wanted to check in a mirror. Not possible of course. She grimaced, remembering the morning she’d become so sick of the occasional glimpse of her own face that she’d banned all mirrors from the Library. Not the healthiest impulse and possibly indicative of autophobia, she found herself thinking – and froze! Just where had that pithy little diagnosis come from?

He was back at the counter, barely three feet from her and she hadn’t even heard him approaching – as if *that* was any kind of surprise! ‘You know,’ he said, ‘I really can’t tell you how important it is that I see that book. A short loan wouldn’t hurt anyone, would it? Not really. And with the information in that book you’ve no idea how much suffering I could prevent.’

She looked at him and abruptly realized that saying no to this man was made so much easier simply because she disliked him so very much. Detested him in fact. She regarded him with artful coolness for a moment. 'Lives are at stake, I think you said,' she remarked, finally.

'Many lives. Innocent lives.'

'Innocent? Is that a fact?' She remembered her daughter, looking up, trustful and imploring, clinging to her and asking if there really were monsters in the world. Five years old, entirely beautiful, and ten seconds from death. With an effort she suppressed the memory. 'Well you tell those innocent people with their innocent lives,' she said, more forcefully even than she intended, 'that life, innocent or otherwise, isn't fair.'

A frown like thunder. 'Final word?'

'Amen.'

'I see.' He considered for a moment. He pulled a pocket watch from his jacket and flipped it open, revealing rows of buttons in place of a watch face. His fingers danced across them in what appeared to be a series of complex calculations. 'If my companion gets back before I do,' he said without looking up, 'tell her I won't be gone long.' He fixed her with a look and suddenly his eyes seemed very dark indeed. 'I have to go on a little errand.'

Extract from Professor Candy's lecture notes.

How far would he go? If someone got in his way – someone he couldn't influence by the normal means, someone who stood between him and his need to impose his will on the Universe – just how far would our heroic, benevolent Doctor be prepared to go?

The New Alexandria Library, 2668.

From beyond the shelves there was a momentary flash of blue and a screeching, grinding roar, somewhere between an enraged elephant and a protesting asthmatic. There was a chorus of 'shh's from the reading area.

The Librarian felt a knot of tension she had barely realized was there slowly unravel in her stomach. According to all reports it was the sound that invariably accompanied the arrival and departure of the CSTE by whatever arcane means of travel he employed (there were tales of an old-fashioned telephone kiosk, but that was just silly!). So he was gone then, out of sight and, thank God, out of her mind. But not, she reminded herself, gone for long. So what now? she considered, drumming her fingers nervously on the counter top. There was little doubt he would try again and the next time the gloves would be off. He would mean business and that was most definitely not a comforting thought. In her mind she ran through the current security protocols and safeguards. Flawless! And for that matter, quite deadly if the need arose. She was confident the CSTE knew that too; he didn't seem the sort of man who would ever bother to ask for something if he knew he could just take it.

So what could he do now? What could he possibly try? The answer, she thought exultantly, was nothing. Absolutely *nothing*! For a moment she almost glowed. It couldn't be often the little man encountered someone he couldn't simply manipulate in any way he chose.

As she turned back to her work, she noticed her little smirk of triumph in the mirror behind her desk.

From the other end of the hall came the whirl of a TransBooth. She glanced round to see Nice Earrings sparkle back into existence from the Literature department. She stepped from the booth and gave that oddly furtive look round that had so intrigued the Librarian earlier. Whatever Nice Earrings was up to, her friend, the CSTE, didn't know about it. Probably not a very common situation, the Librarian thought, sardonically – and probably not a very safe one. By the look of her, Nice Earrings didn't think so either. Clutching a book tightly to her chest, she walked quickly over to the reading area. 'Excuse me,' called the Librarian.

Nice Earrings did an absolutely wonderful caught- in- the- act startle and turn and the Librarian instantly felt rather guilty. She attempted a reassuring smile. 'Your friend had to pop out for a minute. On an errand.'

'An errand?' Nice Earrings nodded soberly. 'Well just you let me know if the Universe ends.'

Nice line, thought the Librarian as Nice Earrings headed off to find a table. Thing was, she sounded as though she meant it. For a moment she was tempted to follow her, strike up a conversation, maybe even find out a few things about the CSTE – not least why anyone would ever choose to travel with such a person – but from behind her there was an impatient little cough. Standing at the counter was the perfect summation of a difficult customer, right from the drumming fingers to the pursed lips and the querulously raised eyebrow. For the eighteenth time that day, the Librarian decided to dislike someone intensely.

It was another hour before the Librarian got a chance to stroll casually past Nice Earrings's table. She had her book open in front of her and was carefully copying one of the pages into what looked like her diary – which, if nothing else, was a good cue. The Librarian leant politely over her shoulder. 'We could arrange to have that copied for you, if it would help.'

Nice Earrings jolted as if she'd touched a live terminal and slammed the book shut. 'Thanks, no, doesn't matter, finished copying anyway.' It was spoken all in a rush and accompanied with the worst attempt at a casual smile the Librarian had seen in at least a month. Quite definitely, this woman was doing something behind the CSTE's back. But did that make her an ally? Find out, she decided. Provoke her a little.

'So! You've been abandoned by your friend, eh?'

An ironical smile. 'Trust me, he's done a lot worse.'

'Really?'

'With bells on.' She looked back to her diary. The Librarian held her ground, thinking frantically of how to prolong the conversation. Her gaze held for a moment on the woman's earrings. She had a confusing sense that at some previous moment she hadn't liked them so much, but that wasn't possible. Her first thought had been how nice they were.

'I just had to turn him down on a book request. He wasn't very pleased.'

'I can imagine.'

‘He went storming off and marched up and down, muttering to himself.’

‘That’s the Doctor for you. He usually ends up talking to himself because no one else can understand what he’s saying.’

OK, time to push it a little. ‘Too smart for his own good?’

‘No. Terrible diction.’

They laughed together – good, they were bonding – and there was a ‘shh!’ from the next table. The Librarian threw a dagger look in the general direction. She was a librarian, dammit, they weren’t supposed to do that to *her*! A hatchet- faced woman glared right back at her. Someone else to dislike intensely, she decided abruptly, which made a total of twelve today. ‘Men all over, isn’t it? Disappearing when you least expect it.’

Nice Earrings raised an eyebrow. ‘Voice of experience?’

‘Divorced,’ she admitted. ‘Well sort of divorced. He just sort of nipped out one night to go to the shops. But I could tell he wasn’t coming back from the shifty look on his fat, stupid face!’

Nice Earrings smiled at the description. ‘You still miss him obviously,’ she said, ironically.

Time for a moment of disarming candour. ‘Yes,’ she said simply.

The other woman just looked embarrassed and quickly changed the subject. ‘With the Doctor it’s not quite like that. He’s not really interested in all that stuff.’

The perfect opportunity! ‘What stuff is he interested in?’

‘Oh, monsters for the most part.’

The Librarian felt her hand grip suddenly onto a chair back and she clung till her fingers hurt. The memory surged as it always did when it took her unexpectedly. Damn her augmented recall! Twenty years ago her daughter, held tight in her arms, asked why she kept dreaming about monsters if there weren’t really any monsters in the world. Outside the vines thrashed and tore at the windows but there wasn’t any wind.

Hush, now, Gwenny, of course there are monsters. But they’re not so bad. Monsters have nightmares too, you know.

The little round face looked up in solemn wonder at the very idea then frowned as she started to frame a question. In three seconds her spine would snap and she would die. From the window there was the sound of splintering wood...

‘Andrea?’ Walter was next to her and Nice Earrings was frowning concernedly. With the usual sickening effort she fought down the memory.

‘Sorry, I’m fine. Mind was wandering, that’s all.’

‘OK, sure.’ Walter didn’t look convinced. ‘Just letting you know – I’m popping over to Science and Technology. Shouldn’t be long.’

‘I’ll cope till you get back.’

‘And, um...’ He glanced awkwardly at Nice Earrings who realized she wasn’t supposed to be listening any more and buried her head in her book again. Walter leant closer. ‘What you were saying about dangerous sex tonight.’

She smiled. ‘Yes?’

‘Turns out I’m available after all.’

Sometimes he was so cute! She touched his nose with her finger. ‘You’re not cancelling anyone for me, are you? Because I think it’s about time you were seeing someone your own age.’

‘Thanks but I’m happy seeing you.’

So *cute*! ‘OK. But be warned, I’m feeling particularly dangerous today.’

‘Great!’ He did his worried look again. ‘Now are you sure you’re OK?’

‘I told you, I’m fine.’ He was always so concerned about her! Almost tiresome in a thoroughly adorable sort of way. ‘So what’s happening in Science and Technology?’

‘A complaint.’

‘Remember: the customer’s always right.’

He shook his head bemusedly at her. ‘After all you’ve been through, how come you’ve turned out so nice?’

‘Tibetan thought control techniques,’ she replied, and wondered if he realized she wasn’t joking. By his smile, evidently not.

‘See you!’ he said and headed off towards the TransBooths.

‘Ginger Wig!’ said the Librarian, suddenly remembering.

Nice Earrings looked up in surprise. ‘I’m sorry?’

The Librarian frowned. ‘Temporary teacher at my school years ago. He took over for a couple of months and taught us Tibetan mind control – said it would make us nicer people.’

Nice Earrings was looking at her in confusion, obviously wondering what this had to do with her.

‘And I’m just realizing,’ continued the Librarian, as her frown deepened. ‘He was rather like your friend the Doctor!’

And for a moment she remembered him so vividly: the odd little figure in the hopelessly obvious ginger wig (what was it supposed to be? they'd laughed – a disguise?) and the old-fashioned black gown turning from the TeachScreen and grinning like a kid with some tadpoles in a jar. 'Hello, class,' he'd said in that funny accent of his. 'Mr Rooney's decided to take a bit of a holiday so I'm taking over for a while.'

Extract from Professor Candy's lecture notes.

The Doctor is a time traveller. Never forget that because it is central to an understanding of what makes him so terribly dangerous. Most of us, in our tiny, individual ways, are involved in the writing of history. Only the Doctor is out there rewriting it.

The New Alexandria Library, 2668.

Extraordinary! thought the Librarian. Quite extraordinary! Old Ginger Wig and the CSTE so hauntingly similar – the quirky, nervy mannerisms, the sudden grins, the often impenetrable accent – and it had taken her this long to realize! For a moment it occurred to her, in a vague sort of way, that she might be missing something obvious here, but the thought seemed oddly difficult to keep hold of so she dismissed it. Anyway, she reminded herself, she had her responsibilities! However charming she personally found him, the CSTE had to be denied the Hittenstall! She glanced over to where his companion still sat at her table. She'd finished copying from the book and seemed to be sticking Post-Its in her diary. That woman was the key, she thought. If she could just find out some useful information.

A TransBooth whirled and her assistant returned from Science and Technology. 'Dealt with the complaint,' said James, briskly, 'I'll file a report and give you the details.' He disappeared into the back office. Always so formal, thought Andrea. With a real pang, she remembered shy, charming Walter. Had he really been gone a year already? It would never have worked, of course, the two of them lusting after one another the whole time, and it was the right decision that they stopped working together. After all, she thought, there were some things too good to jeopardize.

She looked fondly over to the Returns desk where the broad-shouldered, bulky figure was diligently tapping away at his console with his huge, labour-calloused hands. On a mischievous impulse she walked over, leant into him, and nibbled her husband's ear. 'I think you ought to know,' she whispered, mostly because she knew it would make him blush, 'I'm feeling very dangerous today.' She was looking pretty dangerous too, she thought, noting her reflection in the mirror wall behind the counter (how everyone had laughed when she had that installed – they thought she was so vain!). Freddy grinned back at her and squeezed her hand. She noticed a man glance disgustedly at them from the reading area so she stuck her tongue out at him and for the first time that week decided to dislike someone intensely.

Oddly enough Super Earrings was staring at them too, but she looked more surprised than disgusted. Very surprised, in fact. Almost confused. Deciding this was as good a reason as any to restart their conversation, Andrea walked over to her. 'Problem?' she asked.

Super Earrings looked troubled. 'None of my business, of course, but exactly who is that man you were, ah... nibbling on?'

'Freddy. My husband. I mentioned him, didn't I?'

‘Actually, you were telling me how he left you.’

‘Left me?’ she laughed. ‘*Freddy?*’ Actually, she reflected, it wasn’t as inconceivable as all that. In fact, one night in that terrible year after Gwenny had been killed, it had very nearly happened. He’d fallen silent for days and then one evening, avoiding her eye, he announced he was nipping out to the shops. She’d known – she’d absolutely *known* – that he wasn’t coming back. But a few hours later he did. And he was a changed man too, excitedly full of new plans, determined they could start afresh. It was a full month into a glorious new beginning before he admitted what had really happened.

He *had* been leaving of course, intending to hitch- hike to the spaceport and just go anywhere, and he’d thumbed down an enormous blue lorry right outside their house. Entirely blue, he’d said, covered in strange blue- painted wood panelling with a blue light flashing on top of the cabin. Oddly, the words ‘Call Here For Help’ were emblazoned in huge letters along one side. The driver, a strange little man, had offered him a lift all the way to the spaceport and he’d gratefully accepted. It was a long drive and the driver didn’t stop talking the entire time, though to this day Freddy couldn’t seem to remember about what. The odd thing was, though, when he jumped from the cabin at the end of the journey and waved the blue lorry goodbye, he found himself back outside his own front door. What was even odder was that he went straight back inside, knowing he would never want to leave again.

‘Are you aware,’ Super Earrings was saying, ‘that your hairstyle has changed in the last five minutes?’

What an odd thing to say! Of course it hadn’t! She checked in one of the many reading area mirrors.

‘Or that suddenly you’re wearing make- up and you weren’t before?’

What on earth was she talking about? ‘I can assure you, I’ve had the same hair and make- up all day.’

Super Earrings regarded her thoughtfully, tapping her pen against her chin. ‘This teacher of yours,’ she said finally, ‘Ginger Wig. His name wasn’t Smith by any chance?’

Andrea stared. ‘How did you know that?’

‘I’ve had some of the same education.’ There was an ironic twist to Super Earrings’ mouth. ‘Listen,’ she continued, ‘the Doctor is my friend and in most respects he’s a very fine man, if something of an utter git most of the time. But be careful of him, OK?’ She hesitated, as if she was saying more than she should. ‘He messes with people.’

Andrea smiled. ‘I think I probably know more about your friend than you realize.’

‘I don’t think anyone knows more about the Doctor than he wants them to.’ She hesitated again, then pointed to her diary still open in front of her. ‘Do you know what I’m doing here?’

‘You appear to be sticking Post- its in your diary.’

‘Sometimes, when the past gets tough to deal with, I go back and rewrite it. I change things.’ She looked hard at Andrea. ‘The Doctor does that too. But with better equipment.’

Rewriting the past! Andrea felt a chill but didn’t quite know why. OK, time to ask the big question! ‘So what were you doing here today that you didn’t want the Doctor to know about?’

Super Earrings looked momentarily startled and glanced at the library book lying next to her diary. ‘I was that obvious?’

‘I don’t think he noticed anything.’

Another hesitation, longer this time. ‘A while back,’ she said at last, ‘I had a nifty little computer which could do a remote access on practically any database anywhere. And once, for the hell of it, I did a search for references to the Doctor. He’s had quite an effect on history in his own little way but he’s usually careful about not letting it get written down. I didn’t turn up much – obviously – but I did find this.’ She pointed to the book. ‘I couldn’t access the text itself because it was only held in print form, but I did find out the Doctor was mentioned. So when the Doctor said we were coming here today I thought I’d have a look.’ She slid the book across to Andrea. ‘Page one – the prologue. I think you ought to have a look too.’

With a sudden thrill, Andrea saw the title of the book.

Extract from Professor Candy’s lecture notes.

The consequences of having the Doctor crashing around our Universe can be colossal. For instance:

Two men are talking political theory and the Doctor walks past and overhears. Hardly breaking stride he lectures them on where they’re going wrong and where they ought to be going right. As a direct result those two men change their thinking and their plans and in the years that follow lay the foundations of a new civilization in the Kantrassi Solar System. Today, the entire Galaxy- spanning Kantrass Empire is the direct consequence of the Doctor’s casual interference – or so Professor Lyttle believes in his paper on the subject, and knowing how exhaustive his research was I see no reason to disagree.

A lot of Kantrassi thinking is profoundly affected by the Doctor, of course, though few of them realize it. One who did, their most celebrated poet and philosopher Orcnell, only mentioned the Doctor once in his writings, and then merely in the prologue to his collected works, *Four Seasons And A Wedding*. Unfortunately it is impossible to get hold of this work as, prudently, the Doctor bought all the copies. It would be fascinating to know what Orcnell actually wrote.

The New Alexandria Library, 2668.

Four Seasons And A Wedding! It had been here all this time and she’d never thought to look. Quite possibly she was holding the only copy in the Universe the CSTE had not succeeded in purchasing himself.

She opened the book on the counter and turned quickly to the prologue.

‘On the planet Destrus,’ she read, ‘where astrology is the highest form of science, four of the oldest and wisest astrologers of their time went to consult an astrologer even older and wiser than they.’

“‘We’re worried about the future,” they said. “It keeps changing. First it is one thing, then it is another. First there is war, then there is peace. First there is love, then there is heartbreak. Frankly, we just wish it would settle down a bit. What,” they begged to know, “does it all mean?”

“‘It means,” said the old man as he looked to the stars and smiled, “that the Doctor is planning something.””

That was it? That was all? She closed the book, confused and disappointed. It was interesting enough, she supposed, and a curious idea that somewhere that little man was busy rewriting the future while his friend sat with her diary rewriting the past, but it didn’t tell her anything she didn’t know already. Rewriting the past, she mused. The phrase had chilled her again but she couldn’t quite work out why. If only, she thought sadly, you really could rewrite the past.

And the memory was upon her and this time she couldn’t fight it. This time, as happened every day – every *single* day for the last twenty years – she would live it all again. She gripped the counter to keep from falling and she was back in the house on Argolia 4 on the night the plants came alive and consumed the town. The vines hissed and thrashed at the bedroom windows and Gwenny clung tight and asked about the monsters in her nightmares.

Hush, Gwenny, of course there are monsters. But they’re not so bad. Monsters have nightmares too, you know.

(In the library, an oddly familiar woman was walking towards her.)

The rescue choppers were already on the way, she knew, but they would be too late – far too late. In a moment there would be the sound of splintering wood. A second later a vine would smash through the window, whip round Gwenny, and delicately snap her in half. Three seconds from death, Gwenny frowned and started to ask that last question, the one that was destined never to be answered.

(‘Are you OK?’ asked the oddly familiar woman.)

‘What,’ asked Gwenny, ‘do monsters have nightmares about?’

‘Me,’ said a voice from the doorway.

The whole library spun. Andrea felt herself falling. The young woman caught her, held her. ‘Mother?’ she said.

For one fleeting moment Andrea felt the change. She felt a whole new past unfolding in her mind, old memories melting away. She gasped with the shock of it and clung to the entirely beautiful young woman who was her daughter.

‘What’s wrong, Mother?’

‘The Doctor,’ said Andrea, ‘is planning something.’

‘Andrea!’ grinned the CSTE delightedly. ‘You look wonderful. Even more wonderful than you looked three hours ago. Very clever of you. Love the mirrored ceiling, by the way. Most unusual in a library!’

Andrea smiled. Whatever you said about him, he was damned hard to dislike – not that she ever felt much inclined to dislike anyone. ‘Hello, Doctor,’ she said.

‘I meant to ask before. How is that equally wonderful daughter of yours?’

‘Fully qualified doctor as of two days ago.’

‘Dr Gwendoline Talwinning,’ said the CSTE, sounding very pleased with himself. ‘It has a certain ring.’

‘They say her final- year project is going to revolutionize medical science. She wants to talk to you about it actually. Do you know anything about nanites?’

‘They’re very cute,’ he replied solemnly, ‘but they’re not just for Christmas.’

She laughed and then turned serious. ‘We owe you so much, Doctor,’ she said. ‘If you hadn’t been there that night...’

He did that comical little shrug of his. ‘I just happened to be in the neighbourhood – with some industrial- strength weedkiller, a spray gun and a crack team of gardening experts.’ That adorable, impudent grin again. ‘By the way,’ he continued, ‘that restricted text we were talking about earlier. Do you think you could find some way of releasing it to me?’

Andrea smiled fondly at her old friend, wondering how he could still ask that. She took one of his hands in both of hers, squeezed it, and looked at him for a long moment. ‘No,’ she said.

Extract from Professor Candy’s lecture notes.

He’s not your friend. Remember that if you remember nothing else. He has the control and power to make virtually anyone he chooses like him, but if he does so, it is for a purpose. It is part of a complex agenda we cannot hope to understand. It is for that reason if for no other that we, as a species, must learn to do without our self- appointed guardian angel.

(Look around them all, long pause before the big finish.) Perhaps in this hall today we have taken the first step towards learning to say ‘no’ to the Doctor.

The New Alexandria Library, 2668.

‘No?’ It was the face of a four- year- old urchin who’d just been told his holidays were cancelled after he’d been good all week. ‘But...’ he continued, and didn’t seem to find anything else to add.

She smiled sadly at him. 'I've been thinking about my life this afternoon. It's funny, isn't it, that I decided to come and work on a library planet to get over a heartache when I've never had one. It's also pretty funny that I work with my husband when there's a specific rule here against married couples working together. It's especially funny since he is, by trade, a farmer. Actually, when I thought about it, I realized there's quite a lot about my life which doesn't really add up. It makes me wonder,' she added, looking very directly at him, 'if there's someone I can complain to.'

There was a long silence. 'I know what you did,' she said in a low voice.

'Andrea –' he began but she cut right across him.

'At least I have a vague sense of what's happened. I've got no idea what my life was like before you rewrote it. I imagine it wasn't much fun and I'm pretty sure my daughter wouldn't be here –'

'Andrea,' he persisted, quiet and serious now, 'there were three key tactical errors the Deltherons made in their battle with the Drakoids. I need to know what they were.'

She ignored him. 'I'm grateful for what you did – of course I am. In fact I love you for it. Which, of course, is the general idea, isn't it? But anyone capable of doing what you've just done to me simply to withdraw a library book is very dangerous. And I really don't think I could justify releasing a restricted text to a man as dangerous as you.'

Another long silence. She glanced over at the reading area. Daft Earrings was watching their confrontation, riveted. She looked back at the CSTE. 'But thanks,' she said, 'for everything.' And she turned, walked over to the catalogue screen and sat down to work. After a moment she heard Daft Earrings's voice.

'Is this the bit where you shout "back to the TARDIS"?''

'I'm afraid it's looking that way.'

'Met your match this time, I think.'

'Hmmm!'

Their footsteps receded across the floor. She heard the CSTE's voice, surprisingly clear from such a distance. 'I wonder what possibly could have turned her so against me.'

The Luna University, The Hammerstein Building, smaller lecture theatre. 2643

As the little man on the podium finished reading through the lecture notes, he glanced up to see that the full thirty- million audience had finally downloaded – virtuals at the back in the folded- space gallery, corporeals at the front. He looked along the front row, which was barely ten feet away. Right at the centre, staring up at him, was a young woman. She had sharp, intelligent features and a hint of challenge in her dark eyes. On her lapel was a blue badge, indicating that she was undergoing memory augmentation, probably for a career in one of the larger libraries or InfoCentres. A side- effect of the process, of course, was that during

the initial stages of the treatment she would become extraordinarily susceptible to received ideas. Whatever she heard in the lecture today would stay with her for ever. Except, of course, he reminded himself again, he wasn't giving a lecture – he was changing history. He hit the erase button, deleted the entire lecture from the Notematic and turned his full grin on the audience.

'Professor Candy can't make it today as he's unexpectedly taken a holiday,' said the most complex space- time event in the history of the Universe, nervously fingering his false moustache, 'so I thought I'd come along instead.' He fixed the eighteen- year- old Andrea Talwinning with his most serious look. 'I'm going to give you a little chat on the importance of lending library books to your friends.'

Extract from the New Alexandria Library log.

M. On Delth. by Hittenstall.

Text no 12256834750485009 – Restricted Access Grade 1

Current status: Just returned from two- week loan to the Doctor, no fixed abode.

Authorization: Andrea Talwinning

Full text title: Miracle On Deltherus 5: The definitive account of how the Deltherons repelled the Drakoid invasion.